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Targeting American Women: Movie Marketing, Genre History, and the Hollywood Women-in-Danger Film

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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1 Hollywood's women-in-danger films, as American critics tended to call them, comprised one of the most prominent and widely discussed cinematic trends of the early 1980s.[1] From 1980 to 1982, major distributors released an unprecedented eight films that had been made to an industrially recognized textual model wherein scenes of a maniac stalking and killing predominantly female characters were fore-grounded. By comparison, these companies had only handled three similar films in the previous half-decade: *Lipstick* (Lamont Johnson, 1976), *Eyes of Laura Mars* (Irwin Kerschner, 1978), and *When a Stranger Calls* (Fred Walton, 1979). The majors released more women-in-danger films from 1980 to 1982 than any other type of film, including even teen slashers like *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980). This essay examines the six Hollywood women-in-danger films that were given a wide theatrical release: *Windows* (Gordon Willis, 1980), *Dressed to Kill* (Brian De Palma, 1980), *He Knows You're Alone* (Armand Mastroianni, 1980), *The Fan* (Ed Bianchi, 1981), *The Seduction* (David Schmoeller, 1982), and *Visiting Hours* (Jean-Claude Lord 1982). The remaining two–*Eyes of a Stranger* (Ken Wiederhorn, 1981) and *Night School* (Ken Hughes, 1981)–received very limited US releases that were backed by low-profile marketing campaigns. Because they exerted minimal influence on subsequent campaigns, they are not examined in this essay.

2 Scholars and commentators have generally denounced Hollywood's women-in-danger films as representing the greatest misogynist trend in American film history. They have argued that the films amounted to little more than reactionary sleaze. Moreover, they suggested that they had been cynically made to pander to the resentment that simpleminded, working-class, male grind-house patrons supposedly felt about the recent gains in power that were being enjoyed by second-wave feminists and self-determining women. This position emerged when some feminist activists and journalists derided what they saw as the films' celebration of misogynistic violence.[2]

3 It was later echoed by scholars who applied psychoanalytic feminist frameworks to gender representation in the films,[3] and it was centralized by several critical reception studies that examined the cultural politics of the feminist activists.[4] Even countervailing writings ultimately upheld these dominant critical readings of the films when they suggested that even though the women-in-danger film could be used to demonize misogyny–by showing the unjustifiable harassment of likeable women by unsympathetic misfits–, such examples were in fact quite rare.[5] The influence of the position can be gauged by the extent to which it has also shaped understandings of other trends, especially the aforementioned teen slasher film cycle.[6]

4 The fact that scholarship on Hollywood's women-in-danger films pays little attention to their marketing campaigns is not at all surprising. Despite calls by Gregory Lukow and Steven Ricci, Alan Williams, and Steve Neale, marketing continues to occupy a relatively peripheral position in genre historiography. On the whole, genre histories prioritize production, content and themes, and critical reception,[7] thereby leaving insufficiently explored a key contribution to the cultural construction of motion picture categories.[8] Furthermore, the study of movie marketing has tended not to consider how the constituent films of a production trend are promoted and publicized. Rather, such scholarship either provides a detailed case-study of a single campaign or an examination of a template that has been used to shape countless campaigns, such as minimalistic "high concept" print advertising and American distributors' exaggeration of the erotic content of imported art films.[9] Whereas the first tendency highlights a campaign's status as a unique event, the second foregrounds its status as an institutional practice. However, in addition to the individuality of each campaign and the commonalties generated by templates, movie marketing—not unlike film production—also functions as a dynamic historical process.[10]

5 Frameworks that have been developed in the study of film genres and cycles can enrich the way we understand how the marketing of a particular type of film develops over time. As with films, a balance of stasis and incremental change characterizes the marketing of similar movies across a given period. This combination of characteristics is a product of the structural, systemic, and industrial dimensions of movie marketing campaigns and of the individual para-texts that comprise a campaign, both of which present a film as a multifaceted inter-textual construct by highlighting several attractions or "hooks".[11]

6 For example, poster art rendered a close-up of a woman's face and a silhouette of a pram in grainy shades of black and green so as to frame *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) as, among other things, a gothic horror film and a female audience picture. The remobilization of a hook across several campaigns produces stasis. Conversely, incremental changes occur when hooks are emphasized, deemphasized or dropped, or when hitherto unused hooks are introduced into the mix. Thus, print

advertizing for big-budget horror films such as *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and *The Omen* (Richard Donner 1976) tended to duplicate the simple composition, "newsprint" look, and near-monochrome palette of *Rosemary's Baby*'s promotional artwork but somewhat downplayed its female-orientated iconography.[12]

7 In addition to drawing on features that are specific to an individual film such as its bankable performers and technicians, campaigns are heavily influenced by assessments of campaigns that recently accompanied the release of similar films–much like the greenlighting of films is influenced by hit patterns.[13] Marketing departments invite associations to what they deem to be attractive films by referencing their titles, content, and reputations or, more often than not, by employing overtly derivative marketing materials that evoke the films indirectly.[14] Consequently, Paramount Pictures aimed to tap into the commercial success of *Rosemary's Baby* by using its poster art as a blueprint for that of the romance/sports film *Downhill Racer* (Michael Ritchie, 1969).[15]

8 Marketers also attempt to invoke binary oppositions between a new release and undesirable films, which consequently serve either as structuring absences or as foils against which the new release may be contrasted.[16] When *Rosemary's Baby* -like advertizing became associated with underperforming films, marketers distinguished new releases such as *American Werewolf in London* (John Landis, 1981) by using comparatively intricate, colorful, lifelike poster art.[17] The specific objects of evocation and differentiation change rapidly as marketers respond to box office shifts, to developments in film culture, and to other media discourses, thereby suggesting the benefits of examining campaigns chronologically.[18]

9 In contrast to previous studies, this essay focuses on Hollywood's marketing of women-in-danger films in the early 1980s. I argue that print and audiovisual para-texts–posters, newspaper ads, publicity articles, lobby cards, trailers, and TV spots–were used to preempt accusations of misogyny based on supposedly misogynistic intent, sexist content, lower-class male spectatorship, sadistic consumption, and exhibition in rundown urban areas that were associated with predatory males. In so doing, the majors aimed to differentiate their women-in-danger films from sensationally marketed independent releases so as to avoid commercially damaging controversy and to attract the lucrative adult female audience. Across the period, Hollywood's women-in-danger film marketing changed incrementally in response to the commercial and critical performances of both women-in-danger films and other female-oriented releases. Accordingly, this essay will begin by spotlighting the importance of mature females to Hollywood's audience targeting strategies. From there, it will show how the marketing of women-in-danger films in the late 1970s informed their counterparts of the early-1980s. Finally, the essay will focus on the marketing of the films during their high-water mark of 1980-1982. Shifting attention to marketing promises to enrich, complement, and develop genre historiography by generating revisionist, supplementary, and alternative histories.

Those Who Never Go Roller Disco Skating: New Hollywood, Women, and Output

10 It is usually argued that during the 1970s and 1980s Hollywood largely abandoned mature women in favor of courting male youth, either by making films specifically for

them or by "juvenilizing" general audience fare.[19] However, the purported male-youth-orientation of the period is undermined by the fact that the majors continued to target a wide range of audiences with a broad repertoire of films.[20] Accordingly, Hollywood's women-in-danger films were released when, contrary to received wisdom, American females between the ages of 25 and 39 were seen by the major studios as still being an important audience group.

11 The Hollywood majors continued to pitch large numbers of films to American adults because they were seen to be a sizable audience that boasted major growth potential. In 1975, Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) research confirmed that moviegoers aged 25-39 accounted for more than one third of tickets sold to patrons over the age of 12.[21] Whereas other demographics were projected to stagnate or to decrease, this group was expected to swell thanks to the aging of the postwar baby boomers.[22] Within this sizable cohort, women were attractive to the industry because they–rather than their husbands, partners or dates–were assumed to decide what film a couple watched together. With adult audiences having risen as projected, MGM's vice president of domestic sales and distribution publically underscored the need for his company to continue complementing its youth market operations with films that had been tailored specifically for adults.[23] The impact of this practice was also recognized by industry-watchers, with, for example, Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* applauding Hollywood for paying attention to "the over-21 bracket who never go disco roller skating."[24]

12 The continued production of films that were designed specifically for adult females was fuelled by a pattern of ongoing success at the North American box office. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, the majors targeted women with numerous films that had been built around the personal, professional, and romantic travails of strong female protagonists. As Joan Mellon observed in a 1978 report that referred to the upcoming women-in-danger film *Eyes of Laura Mars*, "Hollywood is fascinated with women–their careers, their individual identities, their relationships with each other, their passions, and of course (but no longer exclusively) their relationships to men."[25] Industry decision-makers such as Twentieth Century-Fox president Alan Ladd Jr. reiterated their support for the ongoing financing and distribution of primarily female-oriented entertainment because they had determined that a profitably large number of American women gravitated to such films rather than primarily male-oriented fare like the *Dirty Harry* series (Don Siegel 1971; Ted Post, 1973; James Fargo, 1976).[26]

13 As is to be expected of any production trend, some of these films, including *Our Time* (Peter Hymas, 1974) and *First Love* (Joan Darling, 1977), failed to find a sizable audience. Crucially however, hits of the caliber of *The Way We Were* (Sydney Pollak, 1974), *A Star is Born* (Frank Pierson, 1976), *Julia* (Fred Zinnemann, 1977), and *Nine to Five* (Colin Higgins, 1980) ensured that production would continue throughout the period. As part of their efforts to cater to adult females, the majors also continued to angle horror films and suspense thrillers to women. This was a long-standing cornerstone of industry practice that had underwritten the assembly and marketing of the aforementioned female-friendly combinations of horror and familial drama that followed *Rosemary's Baby*, as well as classical-era tales of women-in-jeopardy such as *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931), *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), and *The Spiral Staircase* (Robert Siodmak, 1945). [27]

14 While the Hollywood women-in-danger films represented a continuation of industry practice, the socio-political climate of late-1970s and early-1980s America provided

significant new challenges when it came to marketing this type of material to female audiences. Unlike the period's nominally similar teen slashers, women-in-danger films were far from critic-proof. Their adult target audience made them susceptible to the protests of taste-makers such as critics, commentators, and activists.[28] The greatest threat to a film's commercial viability came from feminist activists and pro-feminist media elites. As entertainment that fore-grounded sequences of female characters being menaced and attacked, women-in-danger films were vulnerable to accusations of exploitative or celebratory practices; in other words, to suggestions that they applauded, rather than condemned, femicide.

15 At this time, three prevalent and highly compatible ideas made feminists and pro-feminists particularly sensitive to such material. First, serial homicide was in the process of being recast as a form of sexual genocide that was said to be committed by men against women.[29] Second, some media effect theories were positing that pornographic and violent films were outlets for misogynistic and sadistic impulses.[30] Third, suspicions were growing about a backlash against second-wave feminists that was partly driven by the on-screen demonization and punishment of independent women.[31] The suggestion that a women-in-danger film exemplified these ideas–in terms of its authorial intent, content, modes of address, and conduct of its putative male spectator–threatened to deter females from attending them, thereby reducing revenue. This scenario had been signaled by events of the late 1970s.

A Classier Look: Marketing the Hollywood Women-in-danger Film in the late 1970s

16 A veritable tableau of "dos & don'ts" of marketing women-in-danger films took shape across the second half of the 1970s and would ultimately underwrite the ways in which the majors marketed the films in the early 1980s. It was shaped by developments at the North American domestic box office and in US critical circles that unfolded from 1976 to 1979. They indicated that placing emphasis on topicality and sensation led women-in-danger film to perform badly. However, they also suggested that solid returns were possible for those whose marketing spotlighted female-orientation, middle-class trappings, and forms of self-reflexivity that preempted claims of misogyny.

17 The marketing of early-1980s women-in-danger films was shaped partly by two high-profile controversies over male-on-female violence that engulfed American audiovisual culture in 1976. The first controversy served to crystallize the image of independently released horror films as misogynist sleaze intended for lower-class patrons of urban grind-houses.[32] That controversy provided the marketers of women-in-danger films with a foil against which to position their products. It centered on the micro-budget exploitation movie *Snuff* (Anon, 1976). Across the United States, feminist activists came out to protest against *Snuff* after it was inaccurately advertised on the presence of an unstaged sequence in which the film's makers butchered an actress.[33] Marketing materials framed this (simulated) content as violent, pornographic entertainment. Posters, for example, featured a sketch of a naked woman who had been cut into three pieces, and the tagline: "The bloodiest thing that ever happened in front of a camera."[34] Promotion of this sort–and not necessarily the authenticity of the murder footage–led groups such as the newly established Women Against Violence Against Women to accuse *Snuff* of laying bare what they saw as the inherent violence of heterosexual

pornography and the pornographic nature of male-on-female violence.[35] The marketing of *Snuff* also literalized a connection between the motives of the film's makers and the violent misogynists whom they portrayed on the screen. The commercial damage that could be done to a film that became embroiled in this type of controversy was soon brought home by a critical firestorm that erupted over *Lipstick*, the story of a model who turns vigilante when the man acquitted of raping her turns his attentions to her adolescent sister.

18 A misconceived marketing campaign, in which Paramount Pictures sold *Lipstick* as a glossy topical film, failed to preempt claims of misogyny. Although Paramount billed this rape-revenge picture as "a modern drama dealing with a highly charged issue facing women in contemporary society,"[36] the company's promotion and publicity led numerous critical elites to denounce *Lipstick* as misogynist exploitation.[37] Issues had first arisen during early preview screenings, at which point print advertizing had eschewed all mention of protracted and graphic images of sexual violence.[38] Instead, posters had featured a close-up of the film's star, supermodel Margaux Hemingway, and an oblique tagline that read "The story of a woman's outrage and a woman's revenge." Upon being confronted with two brutal rape scenes, some unsuspecting patrons had left screenings and demanded refunds from theaters.[39] Paramount's response only exacerbated the problem. Company executives concluded that viewers had not been outraged by the presence of sexually violent material per se but by its unanticipated eruption on the screen.[40] New promotional materials therefore forewarned audiences of this content. For example, one ad featured a close-up of Hemingway being raped and one of her brandishing a rifle beneath the taglines: "In Los Angeles a rape is committed every 30 minutes" and "'Lipstick' is the story of one woman's revenge."[41] By combining rape statistics, sexual violence, and a photogenic young woman, Paramount's recalibrated campaign summoned the tripate of topicality, sensation, and voyeurism that was associated with exploitation marketing—and which was encapsulated at this time in *Snuff*'s notorious campaign.[42] This association was cemented by promotional taglines that implicated the culture industries in the on- and off-camera sexual abuse of women. "They made her the most famous model in the world, selling youth, beauty, and sex", ads declared: "When she became the victim of a rape, they discovered they sold her too well."[43] As the *New York Times* film industry analyst Aljean Harmetz noted, "[...] the blatant advertising campaign [tore] away the film's last shreds of dignity."[44]

19 Paramount's publicity also backfired. The company had gone to great lengths to pitch *Lipstick* as a pro-female, anti-rape picture but journalists often appropriated the information that the company had disseminated in order to support their own claims that the film actually trivialized these themes. The evidently noble intentions of *Lipstick* 's first-time producer Freddie Fields were recast as the gullibility of a newcomer who had failed to anticipate that relinquishing creative control was part and parcel of collaborating with a super-producer of the caliber of Dino De Laurentiis.[45] Merely summoning the Italian's name allowed some journalists to suggest that *Lipstick* was a cynical retread of his recent hit revenge film *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1975), which had been also deemed to be little more than a big-budget exploitation movie.[46] The most significant failure of Paramount's publicity, however, involved *Lipstick*'s female lead. Autobiographical details and numerous interview faux pas led Margaux Hemingway to be presented as proof that *Lipstick*'s makers were exploiting the film's subject matter. Her family name, physical assets, and privileged upbringing, along with

her time as a pro-skier, her wealthy older husband, her multimillion dollar modeling contracts, and an "I'll make you a star" phone call from De Laurentiis were offered as evidence that Hemingway had led a charmed existence that prevented her from imbuing the role with an appropriate measure of gravitas that might have come from a life of hardship and tragedy. For example, Judy Bachrach of the *Washington Post* barely concealed her disdain for Hemingway when she reported that the actress had failed to understand the term "sodomy" and had burst into laughter after she had mislead the film's director Lamont Johnson into believing that she herself had once been the victim of a rape.[47] Hemingway was portrayed as self-absorbed, naïve, out-of-touch eye-candy, as a novice actress whose physical beauty and decadent lifestyle betrayed the real purpose of her casting, which in turn exposed the misogyny that had really underwritten the film's production.[48] It was implied that she had been recruited to serve a sadistic male gaze to which *Lipstick*'s makers were shamelessly and irresponsibly pandering. Comments attributed to the film's male lead Chris Sarandon supported such an assessment in a manner that aligned the makers of *Lipstick* to the rapist he had played. "It's a very degrading thing for a woman to be tied to a bed like that, with the crew around," he lamented, "[th]e walls were padded during filming but Margaux was literally covered with bruises."[49] *Lipstick*'s narrative image had failed to preempt cries of misogyny because it had drifted close to that of *Snuff*.

20 Conversely, 1978's *Eyes of Laura Mars*–a tale of a fashion photographer who foresees a series of murders being committed in the style of her work–showed that women-in-danger marketing could fuel solid ticket sales and help a film to avoid controversy.[50] One reviewer explained what he saw as the difference between *Eyes of Laura Mars* and its notorious predecessor. "Inevitably 'Eyes of Laura Mars' brings to mind 'Lipstick' [...]," wrote Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times*, "but unlike that film, "Eyes" does not exploit the sex-and-violence chic it is commenting on."[51] To differentiate its property from *Lipstick*, Columbia Pictures played down topicality, realism, and male-on-female violence. The company instead framed *Eyes of Laura Mars* as a glossy, self-reflexive whodunit that had been made primarily for women. It proclaimed the film to be "a thrilling vision of romance and terror," "a romantic thriller," "a powerful love story," and "a subliminal mystery, a tragic love story, and a revelation about the nature of the movie medium itself."[52]

21 By framing *Eyes of Laura Mars* as a high-end women's picture, Columbia offered a quite different putative spectator to the lower-class male that was usually invoked in support of claims of misogyny. The tie-ins that Columbia had arranged with clothing and home wear companies represented an established industry strategy that had been used for decades to designate a film as female-oriented entertainment by maneuvering it into traditionally middle-class, feminine locations such as boutiques, department stores, and women's magazines.[53] Promotional materials also suggested that *Eyes of Laura Mars* belonged to a number of prestigious female-oriented Hollywood production trends. For example, print advertisements conveyed the film's female-centeredness with a black-and-white close-up of star Faye Dunaway that evoked the bold, monochromatic artwork of romances such as *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970), *The Way We Were*, and *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978), and quality horror hits that fore-grounded motherhood such as *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*, and *The Omen*.[54] Furthermore, audiovisual para-texts emphasized the romantic, professional, and psychological travails of the titular fashion photographer. In so doing, they called to mind several hits that had showcased the interpersonal relationships, careers, and identities of female cultural producers,

including a playwright in 1977's *Julia*, ballet dancers in *The Turning Point* (Herbert Ross, 1977), and, perhaps most important of all, a television executive played by Dunaway herself in the commercially and critically applauded *Network* (Sidney Lumet, 1976).

22 Columbia also insulated *Eyes of Laura Mars* from accusations of misogyny by stressing the contributions of female creative personnel. This strategy aligned collaborative authorial intent to the perspective of its female protagonist and not, as *Lipstick*'s campaign had done, to that of a violently misogynist antagonist—a connection that had undergirded claims of misogyny. To the extent that her profession allowed, Dunaway was positioned as a serious and influential presence in the film's production. Her acting credentials and reflexive musings placed her in direct opposition to the novice and naivety of *Lipstick*'s Margaux Hemingway. Dunaway's sway was implied by playing up her role as a cultural producer in both *Eyes of Laura Mars* and *Network*, and by claims that a move into directing was imminent.[55] Dunaway's input, as well as that of fashion photographer Rebecca Blake, also dominated a TV featurette.

23 Moreover, the period's quintessential showbiz career women Barbara Streisand had been recruited to perform the film's theme songs, and tie-ins with camera maker Nikon had invited women to become cultural producers themselves by attending fashion photography workshops that were being held in major American cities.[56] Even *Eyes of Laura Mars*' super-producer-in-the-making Jon Peters was allied to strong women. Claims that he had abdicated creative control to Dunaway, news of his romance with Streisand, and claims that he was planning to make a female-helmed/female-produced remake of *The Women* (George Cukor, 1939) were all presented as consequences of Peters having spent his formative years working in Hollywood hair salons.[57] *Eyes of Laura Mars* was dismissed as pretentious, superficial, and convoluted,[58] and its $13m production and marketing budget plunged the film into the red.[59] However, Columbia's campaign had preempted cries of misogyny and secured sufficiently large audiences to signal the financial potential of lower priced imitations.

24 The rewards of undermining claims of misogyny were reaffirmed by Columbia's successful reworking of elements of *Eyes of Laura Mars*' campaign in the marketing campaign it used to sell its low-budget 1979 acquisition *When a Stranger Calls*. Columbia's $1.5m campaign made some effort to offer older audiences a picture in the vein of *Eyes of Laura Mars* by way of black-and-white advertisements that featured a close-up of a female face and a telephone.[60] Irving N. Ivers, Columbia's vice president of advertizing, publicity, and promotion, explained that he felt that this design boasted "a classier look" than a "fragile blond" being attacked, one that he believed was well suited to a film "in the genre of *Psycho* rather than an exploitation-type picture."[61] However, the greatest contribution that the campaign made to the marketing of women-in-danger films came from audiovisual para-texts which centralized the victim-oriented viewing practices of actual female audiences. This strategy recalled the allegories of female spectatorship used to in some 1940s pictures to convey female-friendliness.[62] TV spots linked female spectators and characters, thereby preempting claims that *When a Stranger Calls* was intended for male sadists who rooted for a misogynistic maniac. TV spots eschewed a protracted game of cat and mouse between a cop and a killer that dominated *When a Stranger Calls*, focusing instead on a short scene in which a babysitter receives menacing phone calls. One self-reflexive TV spot raised the issue of viewer empathy for women-in-jeopardy by showing the babysitter handling the caller after voiceover commentary had intoned, "You are babysitting for a family

..." The other spot featured an audience of young couples and young women, whose responses to a screening of *When a Stranger Calls* corresponded to those of the imperiled babysitter.

The Latest Fashions in Murder: Marketing Hollywood Women-in-danger Films, 1980-1982

25 In January 1980, United Artists' attempts to protect *Windows* by emphasizing female-on-female violence failed badly when the film excited not only charges of misogyny but accusations of homophobia as well. Print advertizing read, "Somebody loves Emily too much" and featured a black-and-white image of a mannish woman holding a knife to a more traditionally feminine woman's throat.[63] A small version of the image appeared on lobby cards, which otherwise evoked *Eyes of Laura Mars* by conveying romance, police activity, and violence against women. Critics, however, isolated the sex of the victim from her attacker in order to denounce *Windows* as misogynistic exploitation.[64] This current of hostility was also likely fuelled by audiovisual marketing materials that linked the putative male spectator and the killer. "Someone's always watching," intoned TV spots over a montage of a woman's surveillance and terrorization. Conversely, much like they would do in response to *Cruising* (William Friedkin, 1980), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), and *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), some claims-makers focused on the representation of the victimizer to condemn *Windows* as reactionary exploitation.[65]

26 Gay rights groups cited the pathologization of same-sex attraction as evidence of Hollywood's institutional homophobia. One spokeswoman declared that *Windows* "perpetuates and sensationalizes the most pernicious lies about lesbians and rape," another that it equated "lesbianism with psychosis, deviance, sin, and crime."[66] Marketing materials that implied serious aspirations on the part of the film's makers seemed to support such conclusions. Critics had struggled to dismiss *Windows* as politically questionable hokum because severe monochrome print advertizing, grave taglines, footage of solemn cityscapes, and downbeat voiceovers had all suggested that *Windows* was a film with a message. This heavy-handedness gave way to a shrewd lightness of touch in the marketing of the next Hollywood women-in-danger film to open theatrically: *Dressed to Kill.*

27 Filmways' marketing campaign suggested that *Dressed to Kill* inspired distanced appreciation rather than the type of character identification and investment that was central to misogynist viewing practices. The company pitched its tale of a murderous transsexual as an exercise in bourgeois gallows humor by presenting it as a quality auteur piece and a jet black comedy. This strategy suggested that scenes of male-on-female violence had been realized with such flair and wit as to undercut character-identification and immersion, thereby supporting the notion that *Dressed to Kill* served the impassionate, reflective "pure gaze" of high culture.[67]

28 This narrative image was conveyed by discourses of authorship, quality, and upper-middle-class-ness, and by punning.[68] Print advertizing was dominated by numerous lengthy appraisals that had been penned by US critical elites. One that was written by David Denby of the *Village Voice* anointed *Dressed to Kill* "The first great American movie of the Eighties," another, this time from Sheila Benson of the *Los Angeles Times*,

proclaimed that "The terror is stunning."[69] Filmways presented *Dressed to Kill* as an auteur masterpiece by summoning the split public persona of writer-director Brian De Palma: the heir apparent to thriller auteur Alfred Hitchcock, and the iconoclastic darling of leftist independent cinema.[70] Furthermore, audiovisual marketing materials were awash with the trappings of the metropolitan idle rich: modern art, psychiatry, high fashion, boredom, and euphemism. For example, the first half of *Dressed to Kill*'s trailer cut between a well-dressed woman visiting a gallery and propositioning her shrink. Punning lightened this material. The film's title was itself a play-on-words as was the tagline "Brian De Palma, master of the macabre, invites you to a showing of the latest fashion ... in murder."

29 It has been suggested that Filmways was trying to bait feminist groups by appearing to trivialize and glamorize violence-against-women, yet paradoxically this strategy also insulated *Dressed to Kill* from such criticism.[71] The campaign invited activists and commentators to protest the film in order to undermine the very credibility of their protests. The campaign suggested that to denounce *Dressed to Kill* on the grounds that it was misogynistic would be to fail to understand a joke – and to not be in on that joke would be evidence of one's lacking sufficient cultural capital to distinguish art from trash. This rhetorical trap traded on the stereotype of second-wave feminists as hyper-sensitive, humorless individuals who lacked the perspective to tell reactionary material from harmless jests. It also undermined the credibility of feminist denunciation by implying that such views were out of step with the views of the implied female spectator–the very audience on whose behalf feminists claimed to speak. *Dressed to Kill* had after all been promoted to mature women as a female-centered film and on the rhetoric of that most feminized of bourgeois cultural events–the haute couture fashion show.

30 The reception of *Dressed to Kill* testified to the convincingness of Filmways' marketing campaign. The film polarized public-sphere claims-makers. On the one hand, as noted above, countless critical elites lauded its style and wit.[72] On the other hand, feminists groups lambasted the film's content and that of its marketing campaign. "A movie like 'Dressed to Kill' encourages and perpetuates violence and pairs it with sexuality by showing vicious acts instead of loving and caring," declared one activist; "The movie and the advertizing is a sex crime itself," lamented another.[73] Although *Dressed to Kill* performed well at the North American box office, its financial achievements did little to excite confidence among distributors. The film's reception indicated that its commercial and critical achievements had been a product of non-replicable elements, particularly the invocation of writer-director Brian De Palma's star persona. Under these circumstances, *Dressed to Kill* exerted minimal influence over the marketing of subsequent women-in-danger films. Rather, the controversies of 1980–of which *Dressed to Kill* was but one–led major distributors to reuse strategies that Columbia had employed in the late 1970s.

31 MGM remobilized notions of female spectatorship in order to undermine claims of misogyny that might be directed at its independently produced 1980 acquisition *He Knows You're Alone*, a film about brides-to-be being stalked by a maniac who was once jilted at the alter. The company's campaign posited a link between female centeredness, address, and spectatorship. This practice began by changing the film's title from "Blood Wedding" to one that was imbued with direct address.[74] Audiovisual and print advertizing linked characters and spectators to indicate that the word "you"

in the new title concerned females. A TV spot, for example, combined images of female characters and the following voiceover narration, "On the night before her wedding every girl is alone; every girl is alone with her dreams; every girl is alone with her fears. On the night before her wedding, every girl is frightened; and this time there's good reason ... he knows you're alone." The alignment of imperiled women and the female spectator was also conveyed by the film's logo.[75] That logo recast a shot of a woman pulling a turtleneck sweater over her face, which had been extracted from the film, as a stereotyped female horror spectator who is too frightened to look at the screen.[76] Although *He Knows You're Alone* was aimed primarily at 16-21 year-old females, it exerted an influence on the marketing of subsequent women-in-danger films because of the timing of its release and the character of its reception (much like *When a Stranger Calls* had done).[77] *He Knows You're Alone* opened during the most intense critical firestorm over films featuring violence against women. In the fall of 1980, the Chicago-based journalists Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert began a crusade against this material by arguing—as scholars would later do— that the subjective or point of view shots that were sometimes used to indicate the presence and perspective of the killer, while concealing his or her identity, elicited support for homicidal maniacs.[78] That *He Knows You're Alone* had largely side-stepped such controversy spoke to the effectiveness of its marketing campaign. In the summer of 1981, there was also good reason to insulate women-in-danger films from claims of misogyny. The controversy that Siskel & Ebert had initiated in the previous fall had not blown over. That spring it had crystallized around the print advertizing of another independently released women-in-danger film, *Maniac* (William Lustig, 1980). Hand-painted promotional artwork suggested that *Maniac* was a celebration of sexualized femicide told from the perspective of a blood-thirsty misogynist. It featured a waist-down image of a man boasting a clearly visible erection, holding a severed female head in one hand and a bowie knife in the other. Its tagline read, "I warned you not to go out tonight."[79] Protesters denounced the film for its reactionary sexual politics and branded it the epitome of a current of anti-feminist sentiment that they saw emanating from an American right-wing that was being energized by Republican Party Presidential candidate and social conservative Ronald Reagan.[80]

32 Against the backdrop of the *Maniac* controversy, Paramount Pictures upped the ante of spotlighting female cultural producers and self-reflexivity in its marketing of 1981's *The Fan*, the story of a washed-up Hollywood leading lady/Broadway debutant being stalked by a psychotic obsessive. Where Columbia had mustered a respected actress when marketing *Eyes of Laura Mars*, Paramount could call upon a genuine Alpha female of Hollywood folklore in Lauren Bacall. Publicity materials portrayed Bacall as a world-weary pro whose poise, presence, and natural authority had steadied a troubled production.[81] Spotlighting Bacall linked cultural production and on-screen victimization by showing that *The Fan* starred a woman whose professional trajectory mirrored that of her character. It was emphasized that Bacall had also been the toast of tinsel town before resurrecting her career on the stage.[82] Paramount developed the alignment of cultural production and on-screen victims by positing a connection between the unhinged antagonist in the film and those critics who dared to speak out against it. This strategy suggested that displaying antagonism toward cultural producers was a pathological over-response and the first step on the slippery slope that had been taken by *The Fan*'s titular psychotic. This angle was buttressed by consistent invocation of a disturbed fan's recent slaying of musician John Lennon. Notices that

Paramount placed before trailers and TV spots stressed that *The Fan* had not been made to capitalize on the assassination–although some cast members spoke publically about their view that the notices themselves had been designed to do just that.[83] If the woeful box office performance of *The Fan* indicated that framing women-in-danger films as self-reflexive, female-friendly entertainment no longer attracted large audiences even if it did preempt controversy, the commercial failure of *The Seduction* in January 1982 confirmed this to be the case.

33 Avco Embassy's marketing campaign for *The Seduction*–a yarn about a TV anchorwoman being stalked by a photographer–summoned the figure of the female spectator by foregrounding discourses of glamour and female self-empowerment. Early publicity emphasized the film's leading lady Morgan Fairchild and its self-reflexive content. Fairchild was portrayed as a glamorous career-woman who had paid her dues by taking bit parts before she had earned a deserved big break on the glossy prime-time soap *Flamingo Road* (NBC, 1981-1982).[84] Much was made of her character's media profession in *The Seduction*. As well as recalling the female-centered hit *The China Syndrome* (James Bridges, 1979), in which Jane Fonda had also played a newscaster, this angle undermined claims of misogyny by aligning above-the-line talent to on-screen victims. [85] "These things have happened to me," Fairchild claimed, "[n]ot quite as bad as the person in the script, however [sic]."[86] Audiovisual marketing addressed women by framing *The Seduction* as part glossy soap, part female-centered revenge thriller. Trailers opened to a Dionne Warwick ballad and a soft-focus montage that conveyed the lifestyle of "a woman who has everything": media career, Beverly Hills home, romance, financial independence. They concluded with the character confronting her stalker, "Now she's fighting back with the only weapon she has: herself." TV spots addressed women directly, asking, "If you were the object of one man's obsession; if he invaded your public world; if he threatened your private world; and if he made you feel alone, terrified, and cornered like an animal: what would you do to stop ... the seduction." *The Seduction* drew neither controversy nor audiences.

Conclusion

34 American moviegoers might have been forgiven for being surprised to discover that *Visiting Hours* was a women-in-danger film. The makers of the film had gone to great lengths to make it marketable as a self-reflexive, female-oriented thriller. For one thing, they had cast the outspoken feminist actress Lee Grant as a similarly outspoken feminist anchorwoman who encounters a misogynist maniac. However, the film's distributor Twentieth Century-Fox had gone to equal lengths to mask these characteristics when it marketed *Visiting Hours* in early summer 1982. The company sold the film as an indeterminate horror movie. Print and audiovisual advertizing featured a number of illuminated hospital windows forming the shape of a skull and such all-purpose taglines as "So frightening you'll never recover." The deliberately vague marketing of *Visiting Hours* was anything but surprising however, given that Filmways had underplayed a women-in-danger subplot in its campaign for 1981's *Blow Out* (writer-director Brian De Palma's follow-up to *Dressed to Kill*). The promotion and box office failure of *Visiting Hours* provided a fitting epitaph to Hollywood's most intense involvement in women-in-danger film distribution.

35 The US critical response to *Visiting Hours* testified both to the challenges that the majors faced when marketing women-in-danger films and to the limited ways in which they have been constructed in film historiography. At the heart of its popular critical reception was the question of whether *Visiting Hours* was an exercise in misogyny or a critique thereof. As had been the case with previous women-in-danger films, a consensus was never fully reached. The very act of portraying strong female characters and a woman-hating maniac enabled women-in-danger films to be read both as celebrations of misogyny or as damning indictments of it; in other words, as sexist poison or as cautionary tales about a backlash against second-wave feminists and independent women that seemed to be brewing in American society. To date, scholarship has focused on the views of those who concluded the former, whether they were the authors of the studies themselves or the claims-makers upon whom those studies focused. In contrast, the marketing analysis presented above has shed new light on how distributors encouraged viewers to conclude the latter. An examination of their efforts revealed that a broader range of discourses on women-in-danger films entered into the US public-sphere upon their release than has previously been suggested. The meaning of the films, both individually and as a group, was seen to be up more "in the air"–to be open to greater contestation–than previously assumed.

36 Approaching Hollywood's women-in-danger film marketing as a dynamic historical process revealed that their campaigns were characterized by a balance of stasis and change. While the majors consistently aimed to undermine potentially damaging claims that the films were misogynistic exploitation in the vein of *Snuff* and *Maniac*, their methods changed in response to commercial and critical developments. Some of their efforts were more successful than others. Efforts to frame the films as though they were engaging with topical concerns, and the spotlighting of female-on-female violence, largely failed to preempt cries of misogyny. Invoking the dispassionate reflection of the pure gaze was polarizing. On the whole, the greatest success–conceptually and commercially–involved the evocation of established female-oriented trends, summoning the figure of the female spectator, and employing self-reflexivity to (over) emphasize female agency in cultural production.

37 Whether the strategies that Hollywood employed in its women-in-danger film marketing are deemed to have been cynical, fallacious attempts to fashion a rhetorical alibi for highly dubious fare or whether they were a genuine effort to reach out to female audiences is open to debate; what is not is the influence they exerted on the majors' efforts to establish a female-friendly identity for suspense thrillers and horror pictures. These strategies served as key components of the marketing campaigns that backed such diverse films as mid-1980s courtroom dramas like *Jagged Edge* (Richard Marquand, 1985), early-'90s serial killer pictures like *The Silence of the Lambs*, mid-to-late-'90s teen slasher films like *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), and early-twenty-first-century gothic horror like *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002). The production of richer genre historiography hinges on heading the calls of Steven Ricci and Gregory Lucow, Alan Williams, Steve Neale, and others to also consider the full influence of the "inter-textual relay of information" that orbits films such as these, of which the historical process of marketing is a major component. Such an approach has hopefully demonstrated that Hollywood's women-in-danger films involved targeting American women, in both senses of the term.

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NOTES

1. This essay uses the terms "Hollywood" and "independent" in an institutional historiographical sense. Accordingly, by "Hollywood" is meant the member companies of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). The term "majors" is used as a synonym. Between 1976 and 1980, the MPAA members were: Columbia, MGM, Paramount, Twentieth Century-Fox, United Artists, Universal, and Warner Bros. They were joined in 1980 by Avco Embassy, Disney, and Filmways. By "independent distributors" is meant those companies that deliver films but are not members of the MPAA. By "independent producers" is meant those companies that make films without the financial backing of an MPAA member.

2. See for example Tacie Dejanikus, "'Dressed to Kill' Protested in Six Cities." *Off Our Backs: A Women's News Journal* 10 10 (November 1980): 3-4.

3. See for example Lucy Fischer and Marcia Lundy, "*Eyes of Laura Mars*: A Binocular Critique," in *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern Horror Film*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 62-78. See also Carol. J. Clover, "Her body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," *Representations* 20 (1987): 187-228. Although Clover claims to derive her findings from teen slasher films, most of her observations are drawn from and supported by women-in-danger pictures.

4. See for example Charles Lyons, *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 53-80; Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980–1989* (History of the American Cinema, Volume 10) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 351-356.

5. Robin. Wood, "Returning the Look: *Eyes of a Stranger*," in *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern Horror Film*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 79-85.

6. See Richard Nowell, *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 17-18.

7. This essay follows James Naremore, Jason Mittel, and others by considering genres to be clusters of discourse pertaining to film categories. See James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1-9; Jason Mittel, "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory," *Cinema Journal* 40 3 (2001): 3-24.

8. See Alan Williams, "Is a Radical Genre Criticism Possible," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9 2 (1984): 121-125; Gregory Lukow and Stephen Ricci. "The 'Audience' goes 'Public': Intertextuality, Genre, and the Responsibilities of Film Literacy," *On Film* 12 (1984): 28-36; Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre," *Screen* 31 1 (1990): 45-66. See also Gary D. Rhodes, "The Origin and Development of the American Moving Picture Poster," *Film History* 19 (2007): 228-246.

9. See for example Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), 132-139; Sheldon Hall, "Selling Religion: How to Market a Biblical Epic," *Film History* 14 2 (2002): 170-185; Alisa. Perren, "A Big Fat Indie Success Story? Press Discourses Surrounding the Making and Marketing of a 'Hollywood' Movie," *Journal of Film and Video* 56 2 (Summer 2004): 18-31; Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) 112-133; Betz, Mark "Art, Exploitation, Underground," in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, eds. Mark Jancovich et al (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2003), 202–222.

10. For examples of this approach see Richard Nowell "'Where Nothing is off Limits': Genre, Commercial Revitalization, and the Teen Slasher Film Posters of 1982–1984," *Post Script* 30 2 (2011): 53-68; Richard Nowell, "'Between Dreams and Reality': Genre Personae, Brand *Elm Street*, and Repackaging the American Teen Slasher Film," *Iluminace* 25 3 (2012): 69-101.

11. See Barbara Klinger, "Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture," *Cinema Journal* 28 4 (1989): 3-19; Thomas Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 27-31.

12. For the promotional posters of *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*, and *The Omen* see http://impawards.com/1968/rosemarys_baby.html; http://impawards.com/1973/exorcist_ver2.html; http://impawards.com/1976/omen.html
<all accessed on January 12, 2013>

13. See Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), 128-132.

14. Nowell, "Where Nothing is Off Limits."

15. For the promotional posters of *Rosemary's Baby* and *Downhill Racer* see http://impawards.com/1968/rosemarys_baby.html; http://impawards.com/1969/downhill_racer.html <both accessed on January 12, 2013>

16. See Mark Jancovich, "Genre and the Problem of Reception: Generic Classifications and Distinctions in the Promotion of *Silence of the Lambs*," in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed Mark Jancovich (New York: Routledge, 2001), 150-161; Nowell, "Between Dreams and Reality."

17. See http://impawards.com/1981/american_werewolf_in_london.html <accessed on January 12, 2013>

18. See Jan Kraszewski, "Recontexualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation: Articulations of Class, Black Nationalism, and Anxiety in the Genre's Advertisements," *The Velvet Light Trap* 50 (2002): 48-61; Nowell, "Where Nothing is Off Limits."; Nowell, "Between Dreams and Reality."

19. See, Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies,* eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 8-36; Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (revised edn) (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 187-212.

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ABSTRACTS

By concentrating on elements of film content and the cultural politics of feminist activists, scholars have suggested that Hollywood's women-in-danger films of the early 1980s represented the greatest misogynist trend in the history of American cinema. However, by focusing on the marketing of such films as *Dressed to Kill* (Brian De Palma, 1980), *He Knows You're Alone* (Armand Mastroianni, 1980), and *The Fan* (Ed Bianchi, 1981), it is clear that Hollywood distributors consistently framed these thrillers less as celebrations of violent misogyny than as cautionary tales of a backlash brewing against American women. Accordingly, this article suggests that Hollywood's women-in-danger films were part of an industry-wide effort to retain older moviegoers, especially mature women. The author argues that Hollywood companies used

marketing materials to differentiate their women-in-danger films from sensationally promoted exploitation fare such as *Snuff* (Anon., 1976) and *Maniac* (William Lustig, 1980). This practice crystallized in the late 1970s following a controversy over Paramount's mis-marketed rape-revenge opus *Lipstick* (Lamont Johnson, 1976), and the promising returns of Columbia's *Eyes of Laura Mara* (Irwin Kershner, 1978) and *When a Stranger Calls* (Fred Walton, 1979). Approaching women-in-danger film marketing as a dynamic historical process reveals that Hollywood's greatest successes involved emphasizing female participation in the production of the films, spotlighting similarities to other female-oriented production trends, and invoking the figure of the female spectator.

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Keywords: Women-in-danger films, Hollywood, marketing, distribution, feminist

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